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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series A)

May 7, 2017

Text: John 10:1–10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The gospel text for the Lent IV (March 26, 2017) was John 9:1–41. It was the retelling of how Jesus healed a man born blind. It was a most notable miracle. Nothing like it had ever been heard of in Israel: Jesus spit on the ground, made mud, put it in the blind man's eyes, and told him to wash it off in the Pool of Siloam. As soon as the man washed the mud from his eyes, he could see, perfectly and clearly.

You would have thought the Jerusalem leaders would have rejoiced with this blessed man. But alas! The blind man, now healed, confessed faith in Jesus and was excommunicated from the Jewish synagogue. Even his parents were afraid to speak up for their son. The shepherds of Israel kicked out a precious sheep that belonged to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the true Shepherd, God's own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ sought out this precious sheep.

It is not accidental that the apostle John places the Good Shepherd chapter (chap. 10) immediately following the miracle and excommunication of the man born blind. It serves as a contrast between the Lord's true Shepherd – Jesus, who seeks out lost sheep and brings them back into the fold of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church, and the hirelings, the Pharisees, those shepherds of Satan, that arch thief and robber who only wants to steal, kill, and destroy (vs. 10).

Jesus began His Good Shepherd discourse with “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep” (vs. 1–2). One of the ways shepherds protected their sheep in ancient Israel was to enclose them in a fenced-in pen, a sheepfold, that had only one opening. This pen was made of stone stacked upon each other several feet high. The entrance into the pen was guarded by the shepherd and a gatekeeper (vs. 3).

Today's reading is a parable or figure of speech (vs. 6). Jesus is the Good Shepherd (vs. 2, 11) and the door of the Sheep (vs. 7, 9), the gatekeeper is the Holy Spirit (vs. 3), the sheepfold (vs. 1) and the pasture (vs. 9) refer to the same things, the Christian Church, the stranger, thief, and robber who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy is Satan (vs. 1, 5, 10), the hired hands, mentioned in vs. 12, are the Pharisees and all false teachers – ancient and modern – who do not love and care for the Lord's sheep.

This may sound strange at first, but the pivotal character in this parable is the sheep. You can identify the Good Shepherd and all true, faithful shepherds, on the one hand, and the thief/robber and all shepherds of Satan, on the other hand, by how they treat the sheep. To be sure, the parable is about Jesus, Jesus as seen in how He cares for God's sheep.

The Shepherd, according to vs. 3, knows each and every one of His sheep by name. The sheep are so familiar with their Shepherd that they hear and know his voice (vs. 3 & 4) and will follow no one else. Wherever He goes, they go. With Him, they find pasture and are saved from everything and everyone that would harm them (vs. 9). Life with the shepherd is good, rich, and joyous. He knows each and every one of His precious sheep, personally, intimately; He knows them by name.

During the liturgy of baptism, almost at the beginning, the pastor asks the question, "How are you named?" (LSB *Agenda*, p. 6). Has that ever struck you as odd? Surely the pastor knows the name of the person about to be baptized. Why the fuss about formally and liturgically declaring the person's name? "The sheep hear his voice (i.e., the Shepherd's), and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (vs. 3). That particularly named sheep is being baptized and claimed by Jesus, the Good Shepherd! There are no nameless, anonymous sheep in Christ's sheepfold, the Church.

The next words spoken in the baptismal liturgy are, "Name, receive the sign of the holy cross both upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified" (LSB *Agenda*, p. 6). That named sheep belongs to Jesus the Good Shepherd; He claims them as His own in baptism. You are the baptized and beloved sheep of the Shepherd! Make no mistake about that dear sheep of the Lord. That's who you are! Your eternal identity is created and sustained in and through Christ Jesus our Lord and Shepherd.

The robber, the thief, the stranger – Satan, that ancient thief of old, is also very interested in the Lord's sheep. He too seeks them. They don't belong to Him. He

doesn't love them. If he knows their name – the Biblical text never describes such intimacy between the robber and the sheep – it's only for the purpose of furthering His murderous, deceptive schemes. His goal is “only to steal and kill and destroy” (vs. 10). He comes to us for no other reason – only – to take away every good and perfect gift of our heavenly Father and lead us to torment and eternal destruction.

In the baptismal liturgy, the devil receives attention as well. The candidate for baptism is asked in three separate questions: “*Name*, do you renounce the devil...renounce all his works...renounce all his ways.” To each question, the baptismal candidate says, “Yes, I renounce him” or “Yes, I renounce them” (LSB *Agenda*, p. 8). Renouncing Satan, his works and ways means confessing faith and love for Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Satan's works and ways are varied. In the parable, Satan uses stealth as he tries to sneak past the Shepherd by climbing over the wall of the sheep pen. Satan is described throughout the Bible as the arch deceiver and trickster. He will use any good thing to further his work of deception such as true doctrine or true piety that is corrupted here and there; it has a ring of truth to it but the deceiver has added some evil or removed some absolutely essential element. You might recall Satan's temptation to Eve as well as Jesus in the wilderness. The devil's enticements have the appeal of goodness, nobility, even virtue. The result is something that kills and destroys.

Satan can also employ much more direct and ferocious tactics. Every age has its martyrs; those who suffer and die for the faith of the Lord Jesus rather than enjoy the enticements of evil. And we mustn't discount demon possession which is described in the NT gospels with alarming frequency. The pastors who have gone to Sierra Leone and Liberia have told me that many of those African pastors have to deal with witch doctors on a regular basis. Whether direct or indirect, Satan's works and ways lead to misery, shame, torment, and despair. But we are not ignorant of his designs so as to be outwitted by him (II Cor. 2:11).

Without the Good Shepherd to call us by name and lead us out to find pasture, we will only find the works and ways of Satan. That's what would have happened to the blind man now healed in John 9! The shepherds of Satan cast him out to become easy picking for their lord and master. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, stepped in and won the day. You belong to Me blind man, now healed. Follow Me to eternal life. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (vs. 10).

Without Jesus seeking us out and bringing us into the safety of His Church through His precious Gospel, we too would be easy picking for Satan. Dear Christians, listen for and run to Jesus as He calls us by name! Run into the sheepfold and find abundant life behind the door of the sheep!

That is how Jesus describes Himself in today's parable. Twice, our Lord says He is the door of the sheep (vs. 7, 9). Remember I said earlier that ancient sheep pens only had one entrance. They didn't have gates with hinges and locks. The door into the sheep pen was the shepherd himself. Only he allowed entrance into the pen and only he allowed sheep to leave the pen. For an enemy of the sheep to get through the door he would have to get past the shepherd who was also the door.

Who stands between us and the wiles and tricks and hatred of Satan? The Good Shepherd, Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified Son of God who rose from the dead to destroy the works and ways of Satan. Tune your ears to the sound of Jesus' voice. Listen to no other. For Jesus came that you may have His resurrection life and have it abundantly, today, tomorrow, for all eternity.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.